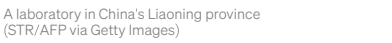
Why we should welcome the lab leak hypothesis

Plagued by fear, scientists have failed to protect us



A laboratory in China's Liaoning province (STR/AFP via Getty Images)

CHINA CORONAVIRUS COVID-19 MEDIA SCIENCE SILICON VALLEY VIRUS WUHAN INSTITUTE OF VIROLOGY

Bret Weinstein

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When the term “novel coronavirus” entered the public sphere in January last year, it swiftly became clear that, regardless of whether Covid-19 emerged from a lab in Wuhan or directly from nature, it ultimately came from horseshoe bats.

As a graduate student, I had spent years studying tropical bats in Central America, handling hundreds of animals, with no protective gear. That wasn’t my choice; it was research policy. Bat wings are fragile, and in order to free them from nets unscathed, you need as much dexterity as possible, and it can’t be done well with gloves.

So when the news broke that Covid-19 had leaped from bats to people, my first thought was: Was I at risk of causing something like this? Could I have been Patient Zero in a deadly global pandemic? The answer, I now believe, is that it would have been exceedingly unlikely. And the logic behind that conclusion gives us substantial insight into the question of Covid’s origins.

I was not alone in studying bats back in the 90s. At any one moment, there are hundreds of biologists doing so all over the world. And yet novel global pandemics are not a regular event, and bat research conferences are not characterised by participants dropping dead of mysterious pneumonias. Bat research isn’t even unique; biologists work on every conceivable viral host: birds, monkeys, rodents — you name it.

So if deadly zoonotic pandemics are accidents just waiting for contact between infected wildlife and people to happen, why are they so rare? To answer that question, we must put to one side the tropes and niceties that have so far constrained mainstream discussion on the matter. After months

of telling us that SARS-CoV2 most likely came to humans from a natural source, the establishment media is finally waking up to the plausibility of a lab leak.

That's progress of a sort, even if the admission lags well behind the evidence, and the motivation behind this grudging acknowledgement is political rather than scientific. Having lost the battle to push a natural Covid-19 origin story into the public consciousness, and now thoroughly embarrassed by a grassroots effort to surface the truth, the press, the scientific establishment, governmental regulators, and the titanic social media platforms of Silicon Valley are now desperately seeking a new narrative that will restore business as usual. Damage control is in full swing.

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For now, though, allow me to be the bearer of good news, hidden among all of this scrambling and obfuscation. As the public has become ever more aware of in the last few weeks, the concept of a lab leak is, based on the actual evidence, the most compelling hypothesis to explain the origin of SARS-CoV2.

That presentation will, of course, seem counterintuitive. How could anyone think that lab origin is a *good* thing? Well, consider each of the two proposed scenarios:

If SARS2 — the virus that causes Covid-19 — came from nature then, logically, it's only a matter of time before something like this happens again. And again. And again. And next time, it could all too easily be worse. Our best recourse, then, is clearly to study potential zoonotic pathogens in the lab. It could even be argued, as it has been by many researchers, that we should enhance these infectious agents to discover their vulnerabilities so that next time, we'll know just what to do.

How else could we discover what we're up against? After all, if SARS2 came from nature, then the biologists who were furiously studying its close relatives were, if anything, too slow and too cautious to protect us. The straightforward lesson of the pandemic would be to simply face up to the clear risk of studying dangerous, novel infectious agents in the lab. Indeed, we would be forced to redouble our efforts before SARS3 catches us off-guard.

If, on the other hand, SARS2 emerged from a lab, then the lesson is the opposite. Covid-19 would be, at the bare minimum, the direct result of our failure to heed prior warnings about the possibility of such an accident. Lab

leaks are not uncommon, so making already dangerous viruses even more dangerous is a recipe for disaster. If, therefore, we want to avoid a pandemic from happening again, obviously we would need to curtail this research.

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And that's why we should hope that Covid-19 *was* caused by human error. As terrible as the implications of that are — millions dead, incalculable suffering and loss; all caused by scientific misjudgement — at least it tells us how to make ourselves safer going forward: we should stop doing the thing that creates that danger. If, on the other hand, Covid-19 is Mother Nature's handiwork, then logically we are condemned to a sequence of pandemics; some natural, others accidental, some better and others far more deadly. Not a happy scenario by any stretch.

Still, some will point out, restricting lab research isn't a fool-proof way of preventing further pandemics. Pathogens do jump to humans; in fact, most — if not all — viral diseases in humans will have arrived by jumping from some other species. So we won't be safe if we just stop collecting and turbo-charging viruses in the lab. In this telling, the best we can hope for is to eliminate the part of the danger that is man-made.

And that is true to a point. There are innumerable unknown viruses in nature, a tiny fraction of which have some potential to infect people. But I strongly suspect that we, collectively, have an exaggerated sense of how likely we are to face novel zoonotic pandemics of the scale of Covid-19 or worse in the future.

For ultimately, in order to create a human pandemic, an animal virus has to accomplish two very difficult things. First, it has to successfully infect a person, and then it needs to jump from one person to the next rapidly enough to get ahead of the rate at which sufferers recover or die. SARS2 is a master of this trick, but the closest wild relatives seem to be neutralised, with spike proteins built to invade horseshoe bat cells, not human cells. To trigger a pandemic in people they need substantial evolutionary retooling.

SARS2 did, of course, get that retooling. The question now is where did that rewiring happen? Is it more likely that it occurred in a lab, with researchers altering the spike protein to make a human pathogen, and then passaging that modified virus through ferrets or "humanised mice" with the aim of creating a vaccine or a model for pandemic research? Or did it infect some wild animal or remote human population, circulate for a while, eventually evolving into a more infectious virus?

Either is possible. Yet despite incredible pressure for the Chinese government to find it, so far there is no evidence of a plausible ancestor virus having circulated in an intermediate population. When SARS2 first appeared in Wuhan in late 2019, it was, from the very first moment, *pre-adapted* to spread through the human body and from one person to another. That's all but impossible — a major evolutionary mystery.

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Indeed, the reason I believe I was exceedingly unlikely to be Patient Zero in a zoonotic spillover pandemic all those years ago is that, though the bats I handled likely had viruses, there was almost no chance they would get into my cells intact. And if they somehow had and were able to move from cell to cell, there is a chance I could have become sick and perhaps died, but there is almost no chance I could have infected anyone else. And, for the sake of argument, even if that did happen, the disease would probably have moved too slowly to generate an epidemic, or been too devastating to its victims to spread very far.

So if Covid-19 did come from the lab, what can we learn from the past year? The most important lesson is actually not about pathogens and pandemics at all, though it is about evolution of a sort. Science is an astonishing process that is capable of liberating us and making us both wiser and safer. But wisdom and safety are not guaranteed. Everything about the conduct of science depends on the incentives around it; if we want wisdom, insight and safety, then those are the values that must be rewarded in our scientific establishment.

But as it stands, science is plagued by a system of perverse incentives in which scientists are condemned to constantly compete for jobs and grant money just to stay in the game. The repercussions of this have been clear for decades, as scientists exaggerate, distort and mislead in order to get their own work (or their field's work) funded.

If we are mostly safe from devastating zoonotic spillover pandemics, why were we told otherwise? The answer is simple: because the scientific method has been hijacked by a competition over who can tell the most beguiling stories. Scientists have become salesmen, pitching serious problems that they and their research just so happen to be perfectly positioned to solve. The fittest in this game are not the most accurate, but the most stirring. And what could be more stirring than a story in which bat caves are ticking pandemic time-bombs from which only the boldest and brightest gene experts can save us?

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This failure of the scientific community would be easier to fathom if it were built on actual lies. But I don't believe that is the case. In order to win at the funding and prestige game — in order to deliver a really great pitch – -you have to be a true believer. Indeed, I suspect the "Gain of Function" research community really thought they were racing against the clock to save the world; experimenting in a reckless manner was a risk they were willing to take. But they were like drunks behind the wheel, with the rest of the world unwittingly along for the ride.

Remedying this will not happen overnight. So in the meantime, we should concentrate our efforts on fixing the small list of places and activities that actually do increase the risk of another pandemic. The trade in exotic animals, both as pets and as food, seems an obvious place to start. Yes, Covid-19 did not begin in the Wuhan Seafood market, but many initially thought that it did because the story makes a great deal of sense.

HIV very likely came from a chimpanzee who fell victim to the bushmeat trade. It was a worst-case scenario; the pathogen had plenty of opportunities to jump to humans due to the blood inevitably splattered in the process of butchery, while the required retooling of the virus was minimal owing to the close evolutionary relationship between people and chimps.

The bushmeat trade is barbaric, and endangers the many to the benefit of the few. And we can say exactly the same about the trade in exotic pets. If you want the biggest bang for the pandemic prevention buck, ending these markets would be far more effective than creating superbugs in the lab — and far less dangerous.

But the biggest danger exposed by Covid-19 comes from our universally corrupted institutions. If SARS2 emerged from the lab, then the failure of our institutions is the root cause, and fixing them should be our top priority.

That will no doubt be a Herculean task. Our virologists, the press, the international regulatory bodies and all the major social media platforms are already dragging their feet, doing everything in their power to avoid learning the lesson the virus's likely origin. And in doing so, they are preventing us from learning it, too. In the coming years, if the world needs saving from anything, it is surely that.

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